

**Statement of
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following Hurricane Katrina”
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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) regarding FTA’s activities and progress in the Gulf regions affected by Hurricane Katrina.

The weekend of August 27, our nation watched with growing concern as Hurricane Katrina strengthened across the Gulf. Although we could not prevent landfall or deflect Katrina’s course, FTA’s regional offices were actively engaged with transit agencies prior to landfall. In Katrina’s aftermath, FTA’s response has been focused, aggressive, and ambitious.

Public transportation is a lifeline for countless Americans. Nowhere is that more evident than in the Gulf region disaster area. From the start of the response effort, FTA has been providing on-site and hands-on technical assistance to transit agencies. We have focused on freeing up transit resources to support the broad response effort, and on expediting the delivery of relief funds to support transit agencies’ long-term rebuilding efforts.

As we move forward, we are dealing with two separate but related crises. We need to restore service in communities devastated by Hurricane Katrina, and we need to expand services in communities such as Baton Rouge that have seen their populations

double almost overnight with the influx of evacuees. FTA has met--and will continue to meet--both of these goals.

In the first days after landfall, FTA helped to provide transportation into and out of hurricane-ravaged communities. FTA coordinated with transit agencies unaffected by the disaster and with our industry partners to provide buses, equipment and personnel for the immediate response. To date, over 60 transit agencies nationwide have offered free transit for evacuees.

Communication in the aftermath of Katrina was critical--and challenging. Within the first week after landfall, FTA got vital information into the hands of our grantees through phone calls, the FTA website, and informational packets with comprehensive contact information and policy guidance. Our message was clear: using public transit vehicles to restore mobility and for emergency transportation is consistent with Federal law— and an agency priority.

Before and after Katrina, our headquarters staff and regional office staff in Atlanta and Fort Worth reached out to transit authorities in the Gulf region to ascertain their operating status and offer assistance. In the first week after landfall, once the full scope of the damage was known, we began to detail over 20 staff and seven contract teams to disaster areas across the entire affected region to help local transit authorities re-establish transit service and support the recovery effort. In Louisiana, a team of FTA regional administrators, project management oversight contractors, and transit operations consultants was deployed. This FTA team produced damage assessments and assisted both urban and rural transit authorities with service restoration plans. Similar teams have

also been assisting Mississippi and Alabama. Thus, we deployed the formidable human resources of FTA where they are needed the most.

Transit has a vital role to play in the restoration of strength and vitality to hurricane-ravaged communities. Our nation's ability to repopulate these communities and restore economies washed away by disaster will require, among other things, local transit systems to provide transportation for workers, commuters, and families—many of whom lost their only means of getting around.

With this priority in mind, we considered ways to expedite the delivery of emergency funds for transit systems to restore service. Two weeks after landfall, on September 15, FTA announced that it would allow transit agencies affected by the hurricane to make use of federal funds to buy supplies, repair equipment, or begin reconstruction without immediately having to provide local matching funds. The local match, typically 20 percent, has been deferred for many communities in the disaster area.

This means that federal dollars already designated for these areas can flow more quickly, and we can award new grants before local funds can be identified. The Mississippi Department of Transportation became the first agency to benefit from this action, as FTA gave 22 transit bus operators access to a total of \$6.1 million in FY 2005 transit formula funds to buy new vehicles, pay salaries or provide other necessities that will help restore service.

Before Hurricane Katrina, the New Orleans Regional Transit Authority (NORTA) provided over 50 million transit trips per year. The system sustained considerable damage and destruction to vehicles, rail, and facilities in the hurricane's wake. An on-site assessment of NORTA's transit facilities was not possible until September 20. On that

day, at our first opportunity, an FTA team conducted an initial damage assessment, including vehicle storage and maintenance facilities. We are still honing our estimates of recapitalization costs.

On the same day, we worked to secure a \$47 million mission assignment with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) for emergency relief funds for transit services in New Orleans and Baton Rouge for a period of six months. These funds will provide existing Baton Rouge residents with more transit options and give evacuees in Baton Rouge access to vital social services, jobs, and medical care. It will help returning residents of New Orleans reclaim their city. The funds will also facilitate the re-employment of NORTA workers to establish transit service in Baton Rouge, New Orleans, and surrounding parishes. We are working to address the need for intercity services between Baton Rouge and New Orleans for recovery workers and commuters.

On October 3, we helped to secure a \$1.4 million, 60-day mission assignment with FEMA for emergency transit in the three Mississippi gulf coast counties of Hancock, Harrison, and Jackson. FTA expects to finalize an additional 60-day mission assignment of \$492,000 for the three rural Mississippi counties of Pearl River, Stone, and George. These emergency funds will give residents the mobility and freedom to go grocery shopping, apply for much-needed social services, or visit a doctor. These are small steps in the re-establishment of normal, daily routines.

I want to underscore the importance of these funds for rural communities throughout the entire region affected by the disaster. Small transit agencies, non-profit providers, and many rural areas in the Gulf region have seen demand increase dramatically as thousands of evacuees have joined their communities. But, they often do

not have the excess operating capacity to meet that demand. Many have also lost buses and vans to the disaster, and staff and drivers have been displaced. In some cases, evacuees are set up in temporary housing, where public transportation does not exist. Funding for emergency services will help local authorities give residents and evacuees the basic mobility they need. It is a first, vital step in the long process of rebuilding individual lives and communities.

Our priorities for the coming months are to:

- Implement FEMA mission assignments in Louisiana and Mississippi;
- Work with the Gulf states and FEMA to fund transit service in areas that have a significant number of evacuees;
- Continue to work with transit agencies to secure FEMA emergency funding assistance for assets damaged or destroyed;
- Continue our on-site technical assistance to transit agencies in four states. This assistance ranges from identifying staff to helping with bus route planning in devastated communities. And, a final goal is to:
- Engage in the planning process, as communities invite us to do so, to ensure that transportation options are part of the future planning for cities and regions.

I am proud of the exemplary and proactive efforts of the FTA before and after Hurricane Katrina made landfall. As with any natural disaster, Hurricane Katrina mandated us as public servants to deploy the substantial resources of the government and our own common sense to help rebuild lives and communities. In the seven weeks since Katrina made landfall, FTA has met that challenge, and we will continue to do so in the coming months. Thank you.

